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E S S A Y

ON THE

PRE-EMINENCE

OF

COMIC GENIUS.

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PRE-EMINENCE
OF
COMIC GENIUS:

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WITH
OBSERVATIONS on the several CHARACTERS
Mrs. JORDAN has appeared in.

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Scires à Pallade doctam.

OV. MET.

..... Ogni vostro atto
Ho sempre con ragion laudato e laudo;
Benchè con rozzo stil duro e mal atto
Gran parte della gloria vi defraudo;
Ma più de l'altre una virtù m'ha tratto;
A cui col core e con la lingua applaudo;
Che s' ogn' un trova in voi ben grata udienza
Non vi trova però facil credenza.

ARIOSTO—ORLAND. FUR. c. xviii.

L O N D O N,
Printed for T. BECKET, in PALL-MALL.

MDCCCLXXXVI.

ESSAY, &c.

IN a contemplation of the most valuable advantages derived from Civilization and Literature, we may justly estimate with secure approbation the invention and progress of the **DRAMA**, as a school of various morality, and a source of perpetual delight. It is in Comedy that we discover the great mass of comprehensive and important knowledge, the mirror of coeval manners,

B

and

and the representation of minute occurrences in common life. The gorgeous fictions of Tragedy rarely afford lessons for general imitation; they exhibit a pomp of heroism, adorned by the tumid graces of imagery, and the unnatural constraint of metrical precision. Such is not the school for experience: we are few of us born to be heroes or philosophers; to be prodigies of patriotism, or paragons of valour. The ordinary occupations of mankind cannot be guided by the dictates of Cato, or regulated by the example of Romeo. Comedy is founded in Nature; Tragedy is supported by Art.

It is from such reasons that we learn more from HORACE than from VIRGIL, from the Satires of POPE than from the Poem
of

of MILTON; as we are more instructed by the disposition of *Benedict*, or the character of *Joseph Surface*, than by the fate of *Macbeth*, or the miseries of *Jane Shore*.

A WRITER or an actor who contributes a successful picture of local virtues and contemporary vices, is therefore more valuable to the interests of society, than a luxuriant Poet in whose writings we behold the florid treasures of romantic invention, or a sublime Actor who represents terrific phrenzy, or excels in studied declamation. By the latter we are astonished; by the first we are taught.

AT a short period from the death of GARRICK arose an Actress, whose lofty genius displays in its full lustre the ma-

jeſty of complicated grief, the fervour of maternal tenderneſs, and the enthuſiaſm of conjugal attachment; who exhibits with equal ſucceſs the blandiſhments of love, and the horrors of madneſs; and whoſe aſtoniſhing powers have juſtly received that honourable tribute, the applauſe of a Nation improved by long experience, and refined by perpetual criticiſm.

A CONTEMPORARY Wonder, poſſeſſed of accompliſhments equally radiant, verſatile, and attractive, was not to be expected: time, however, has in a ſeaſon propitious to public ſagacity conferred upon the ſtage a Female Performer, who is amply endowed with the firſt requiſites for theatrical perfection, and in whom are blended the refinements of Elegance, the archneſs

archness of Mirth, and the rusticity of Nature.

It is the province of Beauty to flight Criticism, while it is the interest of great abilities to solicit and detain it. By this criterion of real desert we are to estimate the merit of Mrs. JORDAN, who, without the least help from private interest or public panegyric, has attained the summit of theatrical reputation, and to whom is justly ascribed the unequivocal possession of original genius.

THE claim of Actors to incessant applause, must rest entirely upon rare and incomparable talents. Superficial dexterity may obtain transient approbation, by an attraction unexpectedly borrowed, or
a grace

a grace casually snatched ; but it is solid excellence alone * which can bear rigorous investigation : at the impulse of agreeable novelty we readily applaud what does not always deserve our approbation ; and he must indeed be a phlegmatic spectator, who

* “ Le Bel Esprit est de la nature de ces pierres précieuses qui n'ont pas moins de solidité que d'éclat. Il n'y a rien de plus beau qu'un diamant bien poli & bien net ; il éclate de tous côtés & dans toutes les parties :

“ Quanta sodezza, tanto ha splendore.

“ C'est un corps solide qui brille ; c'est un brillant qui a de la consistance, & du corps. L'union, le mélange, l'assortiment de ce qu'il a d'éclatant & de solide fait tout son agrément & tout son prix.”

ENTRETIENS d'Ariste & d'Eugene IV.

who at a theatre does not sometimes sacrifice his judgement to his enthusiasm.

It is told of RACINE, with no great credit to his good sense, that nothing provoked him like the praises of the vulgar. The test of extensive powers, is the frequent admiration of the judicious, united with repeated applause from the *million*.

At this æra of national improvement, it might have been expected, that among the "*Sons of Learning*" who wish well to the advancement of Taste, some one should arise who would solicitously employ erudition and judgement on their best and noblest objects; to establish the increasing rectitude of public opinion, and to augment the acknowledgements due to un-

common

common excellence. But when I deplore this negligence, it is perhaps not reasonable to expect such helps from such authorities: to those who attempt to illustrate Wit and Humour by copious Learning, we may apply the ludicrous expression of Dr. FARMER; "they may as well study
 " the *Talmud* for an explanation of
 " *Tristram Shandy**."

THE office of a Dramatic Reviser is therefore often usurped by those whose opinions are crude, capricious, and venal; or, as in the present case, by such as would be happy to resign the pen to superior professors of Theatrical Disquisitions.

TASTE and Criticism can be improved only by a frequent recurrence to models
 of

• Essay on the Learning of Shakespeare.

of perfection. It is upon such principles that I have ventured, perhaps with presumptuous temerity, upon an undertaking, which, to execute suitably to its object, would require profound judgement, mature experience, and delicate discrimination:—to enumerate the various excellencies displayed by Mrs. JORDAN through the different characters in which she has appeared.

THE severity of Criticism has denied to this great Actress the attribute of personal Beauty. To *mere* Beauty her real friends will readily relinquish the claims which might be made in her favour; for she possesses those attractions which are beyond all Beauty, and above all Praise. Her countenance presents to the spectator a representation of strong expression and

C animated

animated diversity: the vivid brightness of her eye illustrates every speech with ineffable power and unerring brilliancy: her laugh is tinged with the most exquisite humour, exciting at once merriment and delight: she possesses in an eminent degree the power of impregnating her voice, in its various modulations, with the effusions of sentiment, and the vicissitudes of passion. Her pronunciation is beautifully correct, and with equal success deviates into levity, or rises into eloquence. We may truly say of Mrs. JORDAN, that all her *attitudes* are *expressions*, and that every gesture is a useful precept to present competitors and future performers. She represents, with a new polish,

“ Those nameless graces which no methods teach,
 “ And which a master-hand alone can reach *.”

HER

* Pope's Essay on Criticism, v. 141.

HER general action, her lively behaviour, and her serious deportment, are all supremely graceful; she seems to possess that by intuitive elegance, which others arrive at by long study and repeated application.

THE COUNTRY GIRL affords a lavish proof of her predominating excellence. She diffuses through every scene power of Fancy and affluence of Judgement. Among the passages for which she deserves to be particularly extolled, I must notice the astonishing *naïveté* with which she recites the speech to *Moody* in the first scene of Act II. “*Ay, but if he loves me,*” “*why should he ruin me?*” &c.—The bashfulness which she assumes in the speech to *Harcourt* and *Belville*: “*Nay, now you*

“*jeer one.*”—The air with which she utters, “*These are fine sayings, to be sure,*” “*Mr. Belville,*” &c. the clandestine composition of her own letter to her lover, the exchange of it, and indeed the whole assemblage of beauties in the fourth and fifth Acts, I will not injure by particular praise, as it is perhaps difficult to say in which she is superior to the rest; nor can such traits of performance be satisfactorily defined: these are the exalted and subtle perfections of an Actor which Mr. SHERIDAN happily calls

“Incense too pure, a bodied flame to bear;

“Its fragrance charms the sense, and blends with

“air*.”

IN SHE WOULD AND SHE WOULD NOT,
her questions to *Trappanti* (Act I.) concerning

* Monody on Garrick.

cerning *Don Philip's* Mistress; the last speech in the same Act, which she speaks inimitably, and which may be numbered among the happiest instances of dramatic eloquence; the enchanting gracefulness with which she enters singing; her interview with *Rosara*, where gay confidence, dexterous policy, and female coquetry, are so powerfully exemplified; may be all regarded as the productions of a mind accustomed to nice discernment, and successful embellishment. Above all, the Duel-scene with *Don Philip*, in the fourth Act, where cautious anguish and trembling expostulation are so finely contrasted by the subsequent display of artificial arrogance and assumed intrepidity:

“Graceful to fight, and elegant to thought,

“The brave are vanquish'd, and the wise are

“taught.”

Dr. YOUNG.

FROM

FROM the lines spoken to *Don Philip*, at the discovery of her plot*, the hearer perceives for a while the united powers of refined Art and genuine Nature; Tragedy divested of gloom, and Pleasure rescued from levity; Heroism free from sonorous tumult and unnatural affectation.

It is the peculiar attribute of Genius, to create superiority and excellence from circumstances barren of intrinsic worth and importance. In the *ROMP*, poor as it is, Mrs. JORDAN displays a matchless power of enchaining attention and commanding applause. Through all the scenes, we are presented with uncommon tints of dramatic portraiture, depicted with skilful negligence and sportive luxuriance. Her
two

"*Hyp.* Examine well your heart," &c.

two songs * are entitled to the most unlimited commendation, and every auditor hears them repeated, with fresh delight.

IN the VIRGIN UNMASKED, a wretched piece, equally destitute of plot, moral, humour, and sentiment, we may say with HORACE, *Lusit amabiliter*. She exerts that happy talent, which POPE, in his Preface to SHAKESPEARE, calls "*something between penetration and felicity*." To this praise may be added, the acquiescence of a mixed audience: the polite are amused, the witty are enlivened, and the vulgar gratified.

THE STRANGERS AT HOME, of which the music is attractive, and the plot lively,
owes

* "*Perhaps he may take it in dudgeon,*" &c. and
"*Dear me, how I long to be married!*" &c.

owes much to the skill of the performers. Among these, Mrs. JORDAN presented a beautiful picture of a complete *petit-maitre*. In the charming air*, which she sung delightfully, she exhibited with wonderful elegance the airy graces of a fashionable trifler; but they were such graces as a fashionable trifler can but rarely attain. Her sprightly softness makes every spectator regret that the character does not allow a more extensive range wherein to prolong her animated display of polished manners.

AFTER her first performance of *Hoyden*, in the TRIP TO SCARBOROUGH, the public was pestered with *œrugo mera*, the pert malevolence of some diurnal critics, whose

* "When first I began," &c.

whose petty cavils remind me of two ridiculous lines by SWIFT :

" Like the watermen of Thames,

" We row by, and call 'em names."

WHOEVER assumes the office of dictatorial Cenfor to the Drama, should be in some degree conversant with Nature :

" *Those who govern Islands, friend Sancho*

" *Panza, should at least understand Gram-*

" *mar*.*" No man can justly decide
upon

* The accomplished Reader will recollect the previous discourse between *Don Quixote*, *Sancho*, and the Barber.

" Gobernadores he visto povay, dixò *Sancho*, que

" à mi parecer no llegan à la suela de mi Zapato,

" y con todo eso los llaman sennoria y se firven con

" plata. Esos no son gobernadores de insulas, re-

D

" plicò

upon capital performances without a frequent review of them.

A FLUTTERING critic, naturally unqualified to judge, pops into the Theatre for thoughtless recreation, and at the conclusion of the piece hurries away, furnished with half hints and fugitive opinions:

“ Thus is th’ accomplish’d ‘Squire endu’d

“ With gifts and knowledge per’lous shrewd.”

HUDIBRAS.

A PETULANT and peremptory condemnation is more easily supplied than a distinct

“ plicò Sanfon, fino de otros gobiernos mas manu-

“ ales, que los que gobiernan infulas por lo menos

“ han de faber Gramatica.”

DON QUIXOTE, Parte .II c. 3.

stinct and deliberate revision*. A hasty comparison was therefore made between Mrs. JORDAN and Mrs. ABINGTON: nor was this sufficient; for the assailant stigmatised the whole performance, and conducted the attack with all the splenetic wantonness of superficial criticism. We were told that her carriage was aukward, and that her colouring was gross and licentious:

A tous les fols Caquets n'ayons aucun égard.

D 2

THESE

* On nous croiroit gens à réflexions;

Mais nous difons beaucoup, & nous ne pensons guères;

Bien rarement de nos décisions.

Sommes-nous les propriétaires.

Nous répétons de bouche, ou par écrit,

Ce que d'autres ont dit, & souvent après d'autres.

Pure Mémoire erigé en Esprit,

Jugemens étrangers que nous donnons pour nôtres.

LA MOTTE—FABLES, Liv. V.—15.

THESE fastidious champions of affected delicacy should remember the important advice of *Brisk*, in the *DOUBLE DEALER**.

THE *Hoyden* of Mrs. JORDAN may be classed among the finest exhibitions of theatrical greatness presented by any Actress, upon any stage. Of her own characters, it is certainly the first, whether for unequalled rusticity, characteristic singularity, or uniform chasteness. We here behold vulgarity divested of disgusting coarseness and insipid sameness. Through the whole of her appearance on the stage she is perpetually acting; and at every minute she interweaves traits of character with an
ingenuity

* *Brisk*. Careless, bring your apprehension along with you.

DOUBLE DEALER, A& I.

ingenuity and success scarcely to be imagined. Such are, the awkward air when she first enters, the use she makes of the slice of bread and butter, the silent show of surly discontent. Her adjusting the dress of the nurse, the refusal to be locked up, (Act V. Sc. I.) her sudden compliance, and her manner of leaving the stage, can never be excelled. Her entrance in the last Scene, her deportment in dividing the cake, her approach to Lord *Foppington*, her introduction to *Amanda* and *Berinthia*, her intreaty to her father, and her unappeasable distress.

To the character, which, as written, is very short, she has added such embellishments in her representation, that it is raised from excellence to supremacy. The admirable

able sketch becomes a perfect picture, variegated with richness, mellowed with softness, and proportioned with exact and unequalled symmetry.

THROUGH her performance of *Viola*, in TWELFTH NIGHT, every attentive observer discovers a series of poetical beauties, delivered in a uniform tenor of pure sensibility and easy elegance.

THE plaintive character of *Viola* admits of little versatility, and less mirth. It is a union of sentimental fervour, doubtful passion, and occasional distress. In the Duel, all the merriment is excited by Sir *Andrew*. Her acting in that scene is replete with many touches of minute discrimination and genuine nature, and she
finely

finely opposes the distress of female terror to Sir *Andrew's* grotesque picture of contemptible cowardice. At the first interview with *Olivia*, she presents a dexterous succession of lively reply and earnest expostulation. Of her pathetic effusions, we may principally select these three: "*Make me a willow cabin at your gate,*" (Act I.)—the famous one, "*She never told her love,*"—and her reply to *Sebastian* in Act V. At her delivery of these lines, the ear is gratified with perfect harmony, and the mind charmed with perspicuous arrangement. Energy and propriety are alike regarded, and the audience is again feasted with an illustration of SHAKESPEARE.

IN the IRISH WIDOW, her merit is conspicuously great. The elegance of her
dress

dress in the first Act recalls to the mind of every spectator that delicacy of Taste displayed by Mrs. ABINGTON, ever new and ever graceful; neither encumbered by the pomp of variety, nor overpowered with the blaze of magnificence. In that scene with the Nephew, her deportment was agreeably gay, with a due mixture of consonance and propriety, and without any grace borrowed by imitation. In her artificial sallies of levity at the Park scene, she acquitted herself very happily; but her visit to *Wittol*, in disguise, may disdain equally censure and praise. As a composition, the Epilogue song has not much to recommend it; but, skilfully executed, it generally produces a forcible impression upon the hearers. An English audience can never forget with what a conscious fervour and pathetic tenderness Mrs. JOR-

DAN

DAN acknowledged the partiality of the Public, in her recital of the last stanza, when the inflexions of her voice displayed in every line solicitous gratitude and artless melody.

AMIDST the dubious reports to which professional situations are always liable, Mrs. JORDAN holds a very high place in the general opinion. Her prudent conduct and amiable disposition are to be mentioned with particular praise. She is not one of those described by Dr. YOUNG,

“ Who stifle Nature, and subsist on Art,

“ Who coin the face, and petrify the heart.”

THE world have justly agreed to esteem her private virtues, and to re-echo the emphatical lines in her own *Viola* :

E

—“ Tho’

—“ Tho’ that Nature with a beauteous wall
 “ Doth oft’ close in pollution ; yet of thee
 “ I will believe thou hast a mind that suits
 “ With this thy fair and outward character.”

TWELFTH NIGHT, A& I.

WHEN I consider my present design,
 and recollect that I have dedicated a few
 hours to the review and investigation of
 characters which she has so happily illustrated
 and adorned, I cannot but wish that
 a more able observer had entered into the
 disquisition which I have here attempted.
 To augment Mrs. JORDAN’s fame is not
 within the power of casual writers, or regular
 criticks ; her celebrity arises from a
 source where she may look for present and
 future greatness, *the lustre of her own original
 genius.*

It

IT is, however, far from being the least of my pleasures, that I have the honour of contributing this disinterested praise to the abilities of an Actress, whose transcendent excellence has received the sanction and the patronage of a judicious Public. I shall ever, with the truest delight, join the loud acclamations of an enraptured audience, whose partiality is equally excited and recompensed by her invaluable merit.

F I N I S.

It is a very common mistake to suppose that the only way to get the most out of a book is to read it straight through from beginning to end. This is not necessarily the best method. A more effective way is to read the book in a more selective manner, focusing on the parts that are most relevant to your needs. This can be done by skimming the book first to get a general idea of its contents, and then reading more carefully the parts that are most important to you. This method can save a great deal of time and effort, and it can also help you to get a better understanding of the book's main ideas.

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